

Gifted Education and Varsity Athletics: How They Are the Same, But Treated Differently

By Terry Bradley

In athletics, we seek out the best performers and we give them the best coaches, the best equipment, and individualized instruction. We encourage them to excel in competition, and we nurture them so they will continue to grow and become the best that they can be. We value their sports talent and athletic abilities.

Much the opposite is true in the classroom. In academics, we mostly seek out those who are struggling and give them the specialized instructors, the supplemental educational tools, the individualized instruction, the funding, and we nurture them so they will become more proficient and get caught up to the average.

What if, in athletics, we let the advanced athletes fend for themselves, and we only devoted the best coaching and financing to those who were struggling to throw a ball, swing a racquet, or run a lap? What if we spent more time with the underachievers on the team and let the best athletes fend for themselves because they obviously already know how to do it. Would that be fair to the athletes who are excelling and are waiting to be recognized for what they are doing right? Would that be the best use of our resources? Would teams be better for it? No, because our society values advanced athletic ability - winners.

Our society needs to put a higher value on advanced academic ability. Those who already excel in academics are often left to chart their own course. Or worse, they stop studying, or stop going to class, because it's uninspiring and unchallenging. (Did you know that up to 20% of high school dropouts are gifted students?) When educators see that a student is excelling in something, they too often leave them alone, and turn their attention to those who are struggling.

What if, years ago, Michael Phelps had been left to fend for himself on the swim team. "He's really good, so he doesn't need our help." Phelps' road to the Olympics wouldn't have happened if the less talented swimmers received the better coaches, more coaching time, and more funding. I guarantee you that Michael Phelps wasn't swimming by himself in middle school while the coach worked on helping other students learn how to swim. His talent was recognized early, and nurtured to grow. Our brightest minds in the classroom deserve no less.

In athletics, whether it's pee wee leagues or high school teams, there is always a large group of kids with varying abilities interested in participating in the sport and making the team. Instructors separate them into groups that are consistent with their abilities: Varsity and Junior Varsity, or A level and B level, or advanced and beginner. The more advanced kids (the better athletes) get placed on the best teams and get the best coaches. They compete. They are honored for their abilities and are pushed to do their very best. They bring pride to their school and to those who watch them work hard to perform at a high level. The next level of athletes get put on a different team with kids of similar ability, and still receive coaching so they can grow too.

In sports, the best athletes receive the best coaching. Can you imagine a potential Olympic athlete being expected to "do it on his/her own" and not having a coach beside them every step of the way because we need to help those who aren't of Olympic potential? We wouldn't even consider such a thing. Why don't we consider this same sports philosophy of helping those with the highest ability, not letting them go it alone, to be valid in academia? Why can't both groups of students, struggling and advanced, get the support they need that matches the level they perform?

Contrast this to academics. Students of all abilities are most often in the same classroom. The struggling students get the one-on-one instruction, they get the teacher's time, they get the specialists, they get the attention. The advanced learners are often thought of as not needing any extra attention or instruction because they're already ahead. "They've already made it. They'll be fine on their own."

Gifted kids in classrooms deserve the same attention in academics as gifted athletes in sports. They are often the people who perform at the top - the medal winners - in the given subject area. They need to push themselves, be challenged, be inspired, be coached, and discover that they still have to work to be at their personal best. Academically advanced kids have a strength, talent or gift in an area, or several areas, and need to be nurtured and refined by a teacher who understands how to best teach at this level.

Why is this important? Think of our society as the team. Our society is often defined by our collective and individual excellence. Thomas Jefferson said, "There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people." All people are not equal when it comes to athleticism or cognitive ability. Society unfortunately too frequently recognizes, honors, and responds to that in sports, but not in K-12 education.

Way too many schools look at "advanced" scores on a state test as, "Ok, this group of advanced students is doing fine. Let's work with and put funding toward the kids who are below proficient and attempt to raise their scores." But don't the advanced students deserve further support and nurturing, too?

Imagine if we let a similar philosophy rule our athletes in America. If they are talented or gifted at, say, swimming, then they'll be fine on their own. What if we turned our coaching attention only toward those who were struggling in swimming (even if they hate swimming), so they would no longer be below average. What if the gifted swimmers were left to fend for themselves? How strong would our swim team be then?

Why do we not have a hard time understanding this when it is applied to sports, yet we feel it's elitist to spend more time and energy in the classroom on kids who are advanced in academics? Our advanced math students who are passionate about math sit, often bored, in a class, while the teacher often teaches to the middle. Students who are struggling have all kinds of help, and they have remediation in math even when they hate math. Yet the students who are advanced and passionate about learning math are expected to be patient and wait for others to catch up when what they really want is someone to take an interest in their learning and take them to the next level. Is this what we do with our varsity swimmers? Do we expect them to sit on the side of the pool and wait for someone to notice that they are ready to learn the next skill? Is this how our best athletes get to the Olympics? Of course not.

The reason the U.S. placed #1 in medals at the 2012 Olympics is because we had a slew of gifted and talented athletes, who are passionate about their sport. They spent an incredible amount of time refining their abilities by setting and achieving challenging personal goals, and had the best coaches available in their sports to help them attain these goals and set new ones for them.

Don't our brightest students deserve the exact same thing? These are students who are passionate about their subject, spend an incredible amount of time thinking about it and reading about it in order to learn all they can, and deserve the best teachers to take them from where they are and move them forward. Maybe then the U.S. would also score #1 in academia, instead of falling downward in our ranking among the other countries of the world.

We become what we spend our time, resources, and energy on. America is losing ground in our academic ranking because we focus most of our efforts on those who are struggling, while often neglecting those who are advanced and passionate about their area of strength. Can't that be more equitable? Can't both groups of students get what they need? Why is it elitist to expect that advanced students should be able to move forward at their own pace? Don't we allow advanced athletes to move forward at their own pace, and celebrate it at the same time?

We as a society, the team, need to rethink what we believe about our education system, our feelings about what all students deserve, and where to spend our time and our resources. While we really DO want ALL students to be successful, they all come into the education system at different entry points, some above average, some average, some below average. We do an okay job with the average and below average students. We need to also recognize those who are advanced and actively nurture their abilities so they can continue to grow. There should be no ceiling!

This philosophy will serve to make many aspects of America stronger and it will send the message that we value excellence in academics... just as we value excellence in sports. The future of the team depends on it.

Spending an inordinate amount of time and resources on those who struggle is a detriment to our brightest minds who can pull our economy, our society, our team, back to the top. Can't we recognize that ALL kids, including those who are advanced, deserve to be acknowledged for where they are and allowed to move forward?

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